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ABSTRACT

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Social Dynamics of a University Weight Room:

A Microethnography

Richard F. Ittenbach

University of Minnesota

Brad S. Chissom

The University of Alabama

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Running Head: DYNAMICS OF A WEIGHT ROOM

Paper presented at the 1989 annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Little Rock, AR. Please address all correspondence to Richard F. Ittenbach, PhD, Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute on Community Integration, Department of Educational Psychology, the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, 55455.

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to describe and explain the social dynamics of America's second most popular recreational sport, weight lifting, as performed on a university campus. Data were collected and analyzed using the participant observation approach to grounded theory research. Several hypotheses evolved from this analysis: (a) It is possible to classify weight lifters according to a preestablished social hierarchy, (b) the reasons for lifting are as varied as the people themselves, and (c) a number of social roles exist to help guide the overt behavior of lifters.

Social Dynamics of a University Weight Room:

A Microethnography

Sports, as played in America, represent a type of social Darwinism, one in which everyone strives to be the best (Eitzen, 1979). The emphasis on physical fitness has had an impact on virtually every aspect of society. Despite America's obsession with sports, however, social scientists are reluctant to study this phenomenon. Fields such as sport psychology and sport sociology are assigned relatively low status when compared with other humanities and social sciences. One hypothesis is that the research to date has failed to gain the respect of the academic community (Eitzen, 1987; Gill, 1983). The body of research has been more experimental than practical, and has failed to translate back into the environment from which it came (Dunning, 1986; Harris, 1987; Klein, 1986). Sport psychologists and sociologists have violated the major premise of sound research--they have failed to provide the practitioner with new and useful information.

The reason for this void is, as yet, unclear. Perhaps investigators should be less concerned with the quantitative aspects of sport and more concerned with the qualitative contexts in which they occur. Sports should be examined for what they are, a product of social influence, one that has grown so large as to be able to influence directly the culture from which it came. America's athletic subculture has its own language, customs, and rituals; they now have their own art, schools, and museums. Because the world of sports represents a culture within a culture, it can be considered as much a social science as a physical science and, thus, cannot be expected to always follow the laws of the physical world. Quantitative techniques were designed based on laws of the physical world; therefore, it is not surprising that these techniques have failed to provide practitioners with new and useful information. The logical alternative, then, would be to reexamine the process and work to devise a paradigm by which the problems of

sport could be accurately and effectively investigated, a model which seeks to examine athletic behavior in the context of social or structural phenomena (Foon, 1987).

A qualitative, or grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to research can perform this function. Developed primarily by cultural anthropologists to study small scale societies, ethnographic techniques can be used to effectively and intensively examine athletic subcultures (Kenyon, 1986; Klein, 1986). Through such investigations sport psychologists and sociologists are able to gather evidence from the ground up, evidence that is based on real behaviors observed in naturalistic settings. The challenge for investigators, then, is to form a connection between the characteristics of a microculture and the unique meanings its members assign to various events, behaviors, and artifacts.

Why weight lifting? Despite its recent appeal, weight lifting is considered to be one of the oldest forms of physical conditioning. There is evidence to suggest that individuals were using progressive resistance training as early as 600 B.C. (Todd, 1985; Tuten, Moore, & Knight, 1983). Originally only used by wrestlers and gladiators, weight lifting remained relatively unpopular until shortly after the Renaissance (Todd, 1985). By the mid 1700s this new pastime had reached the United States and had even entered the home of one of America's most famous statesmen, Ben Franklin. "I live temperately, drink no wine, and use daily the exercise of the dumb-bell" (Van Doren, 1973, p. 743). In 1896 olympic-style lifting became a fully sanctioned sport at the first olympic games of modern times. Until just recently, weight lifters were able to practice their trade in almost total anonymity. However, the physical fitness movement of the past 15 years has introduced a previously obscure sport to all levels of American society. It is estimated that as many as 26 million Americans lift weights as an occasional pastime and that 63% of the sport's newest initiates are women (Sullivan, 1986).

To fully understand this sport one must seek to understand the microculture in which it

exists. One must seek to understand the people, the activities, and the environment that causes and reinforces its own existence. Weight lifting has not just captured the attention of modern day athletes, rather, it has succeeded in capturing the hearts and attention of the broader American culture. Consequently, the purpose of this investigation was to explain through ethnographic analysis the social dynamics of America's second most popular recreational sport, weight lifting, as performed on a university campus.

Methodology

The microethnography of a university weight room was examined through the eyes of two of its progeny. As weight lifters ourselves for many years, we have come to appreciate the rigors of this sport, first as a performance enhancer and later as a means of general physical conditioning. After all these years, however, this sport offers us one more challenge--that of a sound empirical investigation. In an effort to understand more about this unique microculture, we have attempted to reexamine many of the sights and sounds that have over the years become unconscious, and have tried to see this sport as unfamiliar others might.

Participants

Participants of this study were observed using a weight room on the campus of a large, state-owned university in the southeastern United States. Individuals were allowed access to the weight room if they were students, employees of the university, members of a university affiliated club or program, or a paid member of the community.

Because the nature of the study was participant observation, no personal or otherwise confidential information was obtained. Some very general indices were, however, available through observation. The approximate age of people using the facilities ranged from 16 to 60 years; most were in their early 20s. Male lifters outnumbered female lifters nearly 8:1; Caucasians outnumbered Blacks 5:1. Very few Asians or Hispanics were observed using the

facility, and those who did used it on a very infrequent basis. Faculty and staff appeared to be outnumbered by graduate and undergraduate students 4:1. There were never fewer than two nor more than 25 people in the weight room during any one observation period. Most participants confined their workout to about one hour (±1/2 hour). The weight room was most congested during the late afternoon and evening hours.

Ethnographic Setting

As we opened the heavy metal doors to the weight room, all we could see were the remnants of an old training-room equipment cage; the walls, the ceiling, even the chain-link fence were all painted white. We saw a collage of cables, bars, weights, and machines, all emerging from a red and white brick background. The green tile floor was partially covered with a red rubber mat. The room had three doors leading to the outside, none of which were open. The few windows which did exist were located at the top of the walls and were also never opened.

In the center of the room were six power benches flanked on each side by two black iron pipes capable of holding as much as 600 to 700 pounds. Off to the side of the benches was a Universal weight machine equipped to accommodate as many as eight lifters at any one time; what the machine lacked in athletic integrity it made up for in efficiency. At each end of the room was a squat rack capable of holding weights up to 1000 pounds. Lining one side of the room was a white wooden bench; the wall opposite the bench supported a series of smaller stations for specialized exercises. Scattered throughout the room were racks containing barbells, dumbbells, and iron plates. Moving about this maze were people of all shapes and sizes, lifters of one sort or another, focused and moving with a sense of purpose from exercise to exercise.

Procedure

All data were collected and analyzed using the participant observation approach to

grounded theory research (Spradley, 1980). Observation periods ranged from one to two hours per day over a period of five weeks. Field notes were taken and later expanded following observation periods. Informal interviews were conducted and recorded during the observation periods.

Results and Discussion

The social dynamics of a university weight room were analyzed through the aid of field notes. First, an effort was made to compare these athletes with Klein's (1986) hierarchy of weight room participants. Second, an effort was made to identify and understand many of the social, structural, and motivational themes evidenced by the various types of lifters. Although anyone in the community is welcome to participate for a fee, this particular weight room falls under the direction of University Recreational Services and, as a result, exists solely to meet the recreational needs of students, faculty, and staff of the university. Many people experimented with lifting, but only the most dedicated returned day after day to face the rigors and frustrations of this sport.

In his expose "Pumping Irony: Crisis and Contradiction in Bodybuilding" Klein (1986, p.121) outlined a hierarchy of bodybuilders common to most weight rooms: Owners, Professional Bodybuilders, Amateur Bodybuilders, Gym Rats, Members at Large, and Pilgrims. The sport of weight lifting is different from bodybuilding, yet the sports share much in common. Pure weight lifters tend to emphasize heavy weights with few repetitions while bodybuilders emphasize light weights with many repetitions. The outcomes differ in quality while the techniques differ in quantity. Consequently, Klein's hierarchy of bodybuilders is a useful means of classifying the various types of lifters.

At the top of the hierarchy are those individuals who either own or operate exercise facilities; they are the professional staff members hired to run the facilities. These individuals

regulate traffic flow, keep the equipment working, and offer help where needed. Recreational professionals generally had matching shorts and shirts and usually wore the latest in commercial footwear. They moved throughout the weight room with a sort of panache and visited with lifters in a very superficial or informal manner.

Second are the professional lifters, athletes who either coach or compete as a part of their chosen vocation. Their forte may be bodybuilding, olympic lifting, power lifting, or strength conditioning, but they behave as if they were called to practice their trade and they generally attempt to generate income through it. These professionals spend as many as four, five, or six hours a day lifting and exercising; it is not just a pastime but a way of life.

Amateur lifters, on the other hand, are those individuals who have chosen one form of weight lifting as their avocation. Some compete, others do not. Those who do compete do it on an infrequent basis. Although there are times when lifting takes precedence over other activities, lifting never becomes the primary focus of their existence. Professional and amateur weight lifters were easy to spot. They wore torn, wrinkled, and loose-fitting t-shirts or tank tops. Their pants were either cotton gym trunks or sweat pants, sometimes cut off, sometimes not, even in 90° heat. If their shirts matched their shorts or socks it was only by accident. These lifters didn't warm up; they just jumped right into their workout, preferring to work on only a few muscle groups at any one time. In many cases it had only been a few hours since they had done some other form of exercise. Chalk on one's hands, shirt, and thighs, weight-lifting gloves, a towel, and a four-to-six-inch-wide belt were all the markings of a dedicated lifter. Wearing such things as a belt and gloves seemed to be as much a reward for good lifting as they were for protection. When one is lifting weights large enough to require a belt, others were less likely to cut in on an exercise. Lifters attempting to wear belts prematurely were ignored as charlatans.

Next are the gym rats, or "old reliables." These men and women were at the gym two to three days a week without fail and usually began their workouts with light weights or stretches. These lifters tended to work all muscle groups in one session but never for more than an hour at a time. They emphasized consistency and moderation rather than progressively greater accomplishments. Gym rats generally wore the same clothing every day, a t-shirt with an athletic logo, nylon shorts, and running shoes, or at least the same shoes they ran in on alternate days. They were helpful and courteous but somewhat ill at ease around the amateurs and professionals.

Next are the members at large. These lifters comprised many of the new faces in the weight room. They were either first-time lifters or worked out on an infrequent basis. Many were enrolled in a physical education course or were required to lift as a part of some other project, class, or routine. Members at large frequently came dressed as their favorite movie stars, or whatever was considered to be popular in the larger culture at that time. Perfume or cologne seemed to be a must for this group. These individuals wore matching shirts and shorts, often with a city, rock group, or product name on them. If sunglasses or hats were in, then that's what they wore; their sweats and gym bags looked relatively new. Most members at large began their workout in a corner of the room and surveyed the surroundings before beginning. They tended to go with the traditional exercises until they felt comfortable trying out other stations. These lifters moved from station to station with relative ease, always working well below their physical limit.

Finally, there are the pilgrims. These people either stumbled upon the weight room by accident or just wanted to see what lifting was all about. Most were dressed in street clothes and carried books, coats, soft drinks, or other nonessential artifacts. Most pilgrims were very

courteous, rarely asked questions, were always careful to stay out of the way, and never stayed more than 15 minutes.

Rationale for Lifting

The reasons for lifting were as varied as the people themselves. Many began "to get in shape," or "to stay in shape"; others began for therapeutic reasons, and still others, for the most hedonistic reason of all--to build a better body. Competitive lifting didn't usually surface as a reason until after one had been lifting for an extended period of time. The various reasons seemed to cross all ages, races, and socioeconomic boundaries. One 50-year-old engineer commented, "I started because I had a shoulder injury, then, I don't know, I just kept going. I probably do too much now; I guess I should probably quit".

Many do quit, but others are hooked from day one. There seemed to be some type of bond or subtle contract between a lifter and the sport of weight lifting. Although the contract is implied, the athletes behaved as if their participation were mandatory. What motivates a person to rise at 6 a.m. on a cold winter morning just to lift weights, or to return to the gym day after day when the temperature exceeds 100°F, as it did on five straight days of observation? The literature is divided on this issue. Some see the primary motivator for athletics as social (Eitzen, 1979; Kenyon & Loy, 1965), some psychological (Cratty, 1983; Mahoney & Avener, 1977), and others physiological (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, & Hilgard, 1987; Dimsdale & Moss, 1980; Glasser, 1976; Teyler, 1984).

Observing behavior in a university weight room can be almost as painful as actually participating. For instance, as the temperature neared 95°F, one fan was not enough. The air was thick and stagnant and the walls were moist with condensation. Many of the benches were still wet with sweat from the lifters who had gone before. A scan of the room found some lifters working lightly and others working hard. Some were bent over machines gasping for air;

others were sitting quietly staring off into space. Occasionally, they would get up, wipe off their hands and faces and begin another lift. Others were straining, muscles bulging, breathing hard and trying to find that last bit of energy necessary to rack the weight. Others were observed watching their teammates, encouraging, even shouting, "Keep going, you can do it"! In many cases it was unclear whether the lifter was trying to push the weight into position or merely trying to keep it from crashing down upon oneself. As unattractive as these sights seemed, they were real and occurred on a daily basis at this setting. One lifter was asked about his motivation for staying once he got here. He replied, "I don't know; I just don't like to quit anything; I keep going until I finish my workout".

The terms of this unofficial contract are such that if the lifter agrees to put forth complete effort during each workout, the sport will offer several things in return:

1. It offers a place to get away, to be with others who enjoy the same type of activity. It's a time to talk about the kids, the new lock and dam, airline mishaps, anything but the rigors of school. Everyone seems to be equally well informed on all topics.

2. It offers a place to vent one's frustration, to treat the weights as if they were an offending party. The weight room community tolerates behaviors that are discouraged or completely unacceptable in other environments: screaming, sweating, cussing, spitting, gasping, or just lying there staring off into space.

3. It offers a place to challenge oneself, to test the outer limits of one's physical ability, and to feel the "lifter's high" of accomplishment. For many, it is a drive to succeed in a sport where others cannot.

4. It offers rewards that are tangible, as in the case of an olympic-style lifter preparing for a meet in Atlanta. "I'm right on schedule. If I can just get my 'clean and jerk' in line, I should be okay. Yeah! I should do pretty well! That's where the big guys are".

Social Roles

All cultures have social norms, or unofficial rules implicitly agreed upon by group members to maintain behavioral consistency within an organization (Shaw, 1981). Although lifters tended to associate most closely with other lifters from within their level of the hierarchy, there were times when they had to look outside their caste for help. Commitment to lifting required that each participant occupy three distinct roles: lifter, spotter, and helper. Most important was the lifter, the person around whom all activity revolved. Lifters were allowed their full range of motion in any location of the room. Others waited, walked around, or asked permission if there were any chance that their activity would affect a lifter. The second role was that of spotter. Spotters were saddled with the responsibility of protecting, helping, or otherwise watching over the lifter. The potential dangers resulting from faulty equipment, poor technique, or careless others are real. It is assumed that the lifter is fully absorbed in the exercise and thus vulnerable to any perturbations in routine. The third role was that of helper, a person called upon to move equipment, answer questions, or otherwise contribute to the maintenance of the social or physical system. Since everyone seemed to need someone else's help at one time or another, most lifters appeared willing if not eager to help others wherever possible.

One caveat was obvious--only the spotter talked to the lifter; the lifter listened only to the spotter. Listening to more than one person can be dangerous. Second, once the exercise had begun the lifter talked to no one. Encouragement from others was allowed, even encouraged, but rarely before the lift as it would have disrupted the lifter's concentration. If a lifter were several feet in front of a mirror others would not walk between the mirror and the lifter. Third, spotters talked with others while spotting, but only a select few; their attention remained fixed on the lifter even during conversation. As the weight increased the spotter's attention increased. The distance between 300 pounds and someone's neck is rarely more than two feet

or half-a-second. Fourth, for those who were not lifting or spotting, the channels of communication were always open. Anyone may be asked to spot or help out on any given task. Lifters frequently looked for spotters at or above their level in the hierarchy; it would do little good to have a spotter who was unable to help should the lifter get into trouble.

Motivation

Music was never mentioned as a reason for lifting. It did, however, seem to have an impact on the overall atmosphere of the weight room. When the radio was on the mood was generally bright and enthusiastic, even on the hottest of days. When no radio was available the mood was quiet and the atmosphere somber.

The university's radio was unpredictable and the reception poor. To compensate, many lifters brought their own radios but always tuned them to the station that was currently on. Two types of music predominated in this environment, WTUG, the local Black station played rap music, and Z-102, the upbeat metropolitan station played Top-40 songs. Z-102 was the choice of the morning and early afternoon crowds, usually the old reliables and members at large. WTUG was generally preferred by the amateur and professional lifters, usually in the late afternoon and evenings.

Conclusion and Implications

Current research in sport psychology has come under harsh criticism for its inability to generate valid and useful information. The problem is not one of effort or even intent but rather one of design. Investigators have been using quantitative techniques to analyze qualitative, or cultural phenomena. It is not surprising, then, that it hasn't worked.

The purpose of this investigation was to describe and explain the social dynamics of America's second most popular recreational pastime, weight lifting, as observed on a university

campus. An ethnographic approach to data analysis was selected as the most appropriate technique. Several hypotheses evolved from this analysis:

1. Klein's (1986) hierarchy of bodybuilders was confirmed for this population of weight lifters. Their dress, behavior, and attitude all suggest that the differences in type are more qualitative than quantitative.

2. The reasons for lifting are as varied as the people themselves. Some do it to get away; others do it to get in shape. Regardless of why they lift, there appears to be an unwritten contract binding the athlete to the sport. Those who cannot be loyal will not likely be good lifters.

3. This microculture has a number of very strong social norms to help guide lifters' behavior: (a) Experienced weight lifters dress according to function, not style; (b) everyone is expected to occupy three social roles, that of lifter, spotter, and helper; and (c) music is an important motivator, one the lifters count on heavily for support.

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the study was conducted by investigators who are a product of the sport, people who have lifted weights in this and other environments for an extended period of time. Second, our training in research methodology has emphasized quantitative rather than qualitative techniques; consequently, this study represents a first attempt at analyzing data from a purely qualitative standpoint. Finally, the study was conducted at one university in one weight room only; and thus, results from this study cannot be used to generalize beyond this setting.

This study attempts to do what few others have, to explore the social world of weight lifting, one of civilization's oldest sports. The goal of this type of analysis was to ferret out information and certain phenomena that would otherwise (in quantitative analyses) go unnoticed. This aim appears to have been achieved. It is recommended that future

investigators continue to explore weight lifting as well as other sports, to see if there are other psychological and sociological variables going unnoticed. It is further recommended that quantitative techniques not be abandoned, but rather, combined with qualitative methods to provide a more complete picture of the construct under investigation.

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